

Christ the Cornerstone  
1 Peter 2:4-8

Have you seen the news lately? Are you encouraged by the state of the world? Does it give you optimism about the future? Probably not. No matter your party affiliation, I think we can all agree that the world is not improving. We have access to more news and information about the goings-on in the world than ever before, and it is driving us crazy. The information age has not made us wiser, and it would not be difficult to make the case that it has made us far more foolish. We are living in a post-Enlightenment age that has left the world much as it was before the Enlightenment. Our culture, which set out to free itself from the constraints of religion and tradition, is now on a religious quest for what is deemed to be a sacred good. Here's how sociologist Christian Smith summed up the religious quest of our society:



To make everything new, to leave behind the past, to be unbound by any tradition, to enjoy maximum choice, to be free from any constraint, to be able to buy whatever one can afford, to live however one desires—that is the guiding vision of modernity's spiritual project. It is spiritual (not merely ideological or cultural) because it names what is sacrosanct, an ultimate concern, a vision for what is most worthy in a sense that transcends any individual life. It is spiritual because it speaks to people's deepest personal subjectivities, their most transcendent vision of goodness, their definition of ultimate fulfillment. It is spiritual because as a deep cultural structure it occupies a position in the modern West homologous with salvation in God that was prized in the premodern Christendom that modernity broke apart. And it is spiritual because, by being sacred, it is worth protecting, defending, policing, fighting for, perhaps dying for, even killing for.  
(Christian Smith)

That is the spiritual environment we are inhabiting in the post-Christian West. That is the sandy foundation upon which our culture is being built. Here's the hard fact that no modern person can escape. We are religious and spiritual creatures. We all worship something. The religious

quest of the modern West is a dangerous and deadly pursuit. It is idolatry, and therefore, it will not lead to life. It will not lead to peace. It could be summed up in the words of Solomon, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death." (Proverbs 14:12)

The message we will hear from Peter tonight is the groundbreaking and revolutionary message that gives life. It is a stable and solid foundation because it is the foundation that God has laid. It is the church's one foundation—Jesus Christ our Lord.

<sup>4</sup> As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, <sup>5</sup> you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. <sup>6</sup> For it stands in Scripture:

"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious,  
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

<sup>7</sup> So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

"The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone,"

<sup>8</sup> and

"A stone of stumbling,  
and a rock of offense."

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.  
(1 Peter 2:4-8)

Before we break this down, it helps to remember the context in which Peter wrote. He wrote at a time when the Temple was still standing in Jerusalem. Most scholars agree that this letter was likely written between 60-65 AD, which means the destruction of the Temple was imminent. Remember that the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem in 70 AD and destroyed the Temple that Herod had built. At the time this letter was written, though, the Temple was considered by Jews to be the place where God dwelled on earth. If you were a Jew, and you wanted to come to God, you came to the Temple. In addition to the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, just about every city in the Roman world also had temples built to pagan gods. Everywhere you went, you would encounter buildings constructed by human hands to honor the gods.

Peter is speaking here about a Temple, but what is striking is that he does not speak about the temples that would have been strewn throughout Asia minor, where the people to whom he was writing dwelled. Neither does he speak about the Temple in Jerusalem. This temple of which Peter speaks would be a serious offense to both Jews and Gentiles. It is the true Temple,

a spiritual house being built by God himself. All the temples that existed then have fallen and are in ruins today, but this Temple is still standing, and is still being built today.

How is this house being built? It all begins with those who are coming to Jesus. The phrase “as you come to Him,” is actually in the present participle in the original Greek, which means that it carries the idea of an ongoing present action. Peter is saying, “If you want to be a part of the spiritual house that God is building, you have to continually be coming to Jesus.” There is a reciprocity here that is easy to miss. What do I mean? We are coming to the One who came to us. One of the main designations of the Messiah in the Old Testament and in the New Testament is “the coming One.” Jesus is the one who came to us. The Word became flesh, and made His dwelling among us. (John 1:14) He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. (John 1:11) There is a great statement of this at the end of the third chapter of John’s gospel account.

**<sup>31</sup> He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all. (John 3:31)**

That is a great description of Jesus. Jesus is He who came from heaven and who is above all! That’s the one to whom Peter says we can and should continually come. We come to Him who came to us.

But not only did He come to us, He also ascended to the seat at the right hand of the Father in glory. He who descended also ascended. That’s what Paul makes explicit in Ephesians 4,

**<sup>10</sup> He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things. (Ephesians 4:10)**

That means that when Peter says we are coming to Jesus, He means we are coming to the One who has ascended far above all the heavens. Think of that! You might ask, how can I get to the One who is far above all the heavens? I’m stuck down here on earth. In a word, faith. Faith is the only way to come to the One who is ascended on high. Faith that He is your high priest. As your high priest, He carries you with Him into the Holy of Holies in heaven. The author of Hebrews put it this way,

**<sup>14</sup> Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)**

The simple declaration of the gospel is that Jesus, having died and risen again, and having passed through the heavens, has opened up the way to God’s throne in heaven. We can draw near (which is the same Greek word Peter uses in 1 Peter 2:4, “come”) to the throne of grace at any time and in any location on this earth. We come to Him where He is through faith. Through

holding fast our confession of the truth that we have a high priest who can sympathize with us, because He was tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sin. He came to overcome sin, so that you could be overcome by His love and grace and come to Him where He is now as your High Priest. Are you coming to Him?

Here's the thing about those who are coming to Him: they begin to look a lot like Him. Peter describes believers as living stones just like Jesus is a living stone. The term living stones is an oxymoron. Stones by definition are dead, which is why we have the expression "stone dead." That makes it clear that Peter is speaking of something supernatural here. He is speaking of the work of God, not the work of men. God is the one who can take dead things and make them alive. This is one of the primary revelations of God's Word. God gives life to the dead. His purpose in salvation is to bring life out of death. Until we come to Christ, we are dead stones, but when we come to Him, the living stone, we, too, are living stones!

Before we dive more deeply into verses 4-5, let's observe how Peter came to the understanding of what he lays out for us in verses 4-5.

Peter is not just coming up with a new idea here. No, he is drawing upon the Scriptures. The imagery of the stone chosen by God did not originate with Peter. It is an image used throughout the Old Testament. When Christ came, the Holy Spirit revealed to the Apostles that He was the stone spoken of by the prophets. Peter shows us that this truth was there in the Old Testament all along, and now it has been made manifest through Christ.

<sup>6</sup>For it stands in Scripture:

"Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious,  
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

<sup>7</sup>So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

"The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone,"

<sup>8</sup>and

"A stone of stumbling,  
and a rock of offense."

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.  
(1 Peter 2:6-8)

Here we have three different Old Testament passages (Isaiah 28:16; Psalm 118:22; and Isaiah 8:14). Now we see that Peter has simply been giving us an exposition of the Old Testament. He

has been showing us what the Holy Spirit meant when He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories (1 Peter 1:10-11) through this imagery of the rejected stone, that became the cornerstone.

What do we learn from these prophecies? First, we learn about the cornerstone. What is this cornerstone? We've already been given the answer. Peter has told us that it is Jesus Christ. He is the living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious. Jesus functions as the cornerstone of God's house.

It would be helpful to understand how a stone mason would have worked in those days. When constructing a large building in those days, a stone mason would begin his work by carefully seeking out and choosing the perfectly shaped stone to sit at the head of the corner. That would be the first stone laid, and every other stone would rest its weight upon the cornerstone. The cornerstone set the angles for the whole house. If the cornerstone were to be removed, the whole structure would crumble.

Stones were not fabricated or made in a factory back in those days. We are not talking about bricks. We are talking about stones, each unique in its shape and size. The mason would often spend copious time searching for just the right stone. And when he found it, it was precious. A cornerstone that would be just the right fit for holding up the entire structure was precious and difficult to come by.

Peter is saying that the cornerstone of God's house, the precious stone upon which God has chosen to build His entire house, is Jesus Christ. It is Christ crucified, bearing our sins in His body on the cross. He has always been the stone God chose. He is the Rock of Ages, cleft for me.

There is no one being built into God's house who is not resting upon the cornerstone. We are all leaning on Christ. This is more than just an intellectual assent to a creed. This is more than just saying you believe what your parents have told you to believe. This is placing the full weight of your life upon Christ. He is the cornerstone, and you can't be a part of His house if your weight is not resting upon Him. You live your life in dependence upon the cornerstone, just as every stone in a building depends upon the strength of the cornerstone. If that cornerstone couldn't bear up all the weight of the house, the house would fall. Christ is able to bear up the weight. He is chosen for that role and He is precious because He is able to fulfill that role.

Yet, the prophets foretold that He would be rejected, even though He is chosen and precious. Who are the ones who reject Him? They are the builders. There is so much to unpack in that word. The builders can be traced back as far as the descendants of Cain. They can be traced back to Babel. What is the chief characteristic of the builders? Pride. They are those who seek to be gods. It is not enough for them to be creatures made in the image of God. They want to be gods themselves. They are attempting to build their utopia on earth. They are those who believe in progress. They are those who are optimistic and hopeful about the potential of mankind to produce a world of righteousness, equity, peace, and love.

Builders can be irreligious and secular, but they can also be incredibly religious. This is not something confined to the secular world. The Jewish leaders were the builders, just as much as the Romans were the builders. There are builders in our churches, just as much as there are builders in the world. Religious builders are those who place their confidence in the flesh. Jesus and the Apostles reserved their sternest rebukes for the religious builders. Paul was speaking of religious builders when he said, **“Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh.” (Philippians 3:2)** He was referring to those who were still like he once was before Christ appeared to Him. What was he like? He was proud of his religion. He was proud of his heritage. He was proud of his zeal. He was proud of his law-keeping. He was a builder. He had rejected Christ, the cornerstone.

Jesus described the religious builders as clearly as possible in Matthew 23. He described them in this way, **“They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” (Matthew 23:4-12)**

After that, He pronounced seven woes upon the scribes and Pharisees, the religious builders who would kill Him in just a matter of days. The reason they reject Him is their pride. It is because His message tells them, **“The greatest among you shall be your servant.”** Those are the words that the builders despise. The builders do not want to be servants. They want to be served. They are the righteous ones who feel that they are worthy of being served. But Jesus, the cornerstone came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. That is the stone of stumbling, and the rock of offense.

So, the builders continue to reject the cornerstone. In every age, they have rejected Him. Today, they continue to reject Him. They despise Him. They are too wise to believe that such a foolish message could be true. They are too strong to believe that they need a Savior. This is what Paul said to the Corinthians,

**<sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:22-25)**

What is the end of the builders? They stumble. What does that mean? It means their lives are unstable. It means they never know peace. It means they are walking around in the darkness of this world without any light. Usually, the builders are completely unaware that they are stumbling. They don’t realize that the entire course of their life and their ultimate destination is

being determined by the fact that they are offended by the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because they reject Christ, they don't know that they are in darkness. In fact, they often believe their rejection of Christ is what has brought them into the light.

But their lives could be described by that word stumbling. They are continually confounded because things never go as they have planned. Their soul is in turmoil within them because they have not come to the living stone chosen and precious in God's sight. They can't make sense of the world they are building. Their message is often, "Stop hate! We need love! We need unity!" And they believe somehow their words will bring love and unity to the world. Yet, they stumble over the stone that has offered love and unity to the world. The only stone upon which a house of love and unity can be built is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. The love and unity they seek always eludes their grasp. Instead of producing love, their striving and efforts produce its opposite. The greater their efforts at producing love, the greater the intensity of the hatred that is actually produced. They stumble. The more they strive for unity apart from Jesus Christ, the more bloodshed and warfare come about.

So, that is the negative. Such are those who reject the stone. Let's turn to the positive. Who are those to whom the stone is chosen and precious? They are those believing on Him. The word believing is in the present participle. I think the biblical authors used that tense very intentionally. It implies that this belief is not just a one-time decision. It is an ever-present reality in the life of the one who believes. We don't just believe on Jesus; we are believing on Him. Are you believing on Jesus right now? I'm not asking if you walked an aisle or prayed a prayer when you were younger. I'm asking you right now, in this moment, are you believing on Jesus?

If so, He is precious to you. That's what Peter means when he says, "the honor is for those who believe." The word translated honor is the same word translated as precious in the Isaiah 28 passage. The preciousness is for you who believe. I think there are two sides to that preciousness. First, He is precious to you. You get the privilege of experiencing just how beautiful He is. To you, He is precious. That is how you know if you are a Christian. Is Christ precious to you?

The other side of the same coin is that you are precious as well. Those to whom Jesus is precious become precious in God's sight just like Jesus is precious in God's sight. We get to partake of His preciousness. We are living stones being built up into a spiritual house. That means to God, we are chosen and precious, too. We are not the cornerstone, that's Jesus alone. But we are precious living stones in the house that God is building upon the cornerstone.

What is the end of believing in Him? It is put in the negative here. "They shall not be put to shame." This is a figure of speech known as litotes, which means an ironic understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of its contrary. For instance, we say, "you won't be sorry" to mean you'll be very glad. Another biblical example of litotes is Paul's expression in Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel," by which he really means, "the gospel is my greatest glory and only boast."

In our text, the expression carries at least two different positive meanings for those who believe on Jesus Christ. First, in the original Hebrew of Isaiah 28:16, the word means “make haste,” as in, “those believing in Him will not make haste.” Positively, that means they will be kept in peace and security when the foundations of the builders fail. They will never be in a state of panic. There is no sense of fear or of rushing for the cover of safety when life in this world is difficult. This is expressed clearly in Psalm 46:2, “Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea.” (Psalm 46:2) That is the same idea. We will not make haste. Even if the ground beneath our feet crumbles, we will not be in a state of utter anxiety and fear because we know that our cornerstone is in heaven.

In an age like ours, this is an astounding reality! We are being warned of potential calamities from every side. Some warn of impending climate disaster. Others warn the economy is on the brink of collapse. We hear warnings of a new pandemic. We are warned of the corruption and incompetence of our political leaders. On top of all this, we are in the nuclear age. Donald Trump claims he averted a nuclear holocaust when he was president. Is it true? I don’t know. He is warning that we are being led into World War III, which he says would be “a nightmare beyond imagination—obliteration.” Is he right? I do not know. Regardless, I can say with confidence that I will not make haste if it is true. There is nothing to fear for the one believing on Christ. Even the threat of a nuclear holocaust will not cause us to make haste.

What’s more, it will not cause us to be confounded, which is another sense of the word translated “put to shame.” In the KJV, it is translated, “shall not be confounded.” Positively, it means that we will always have understanding of the events that unfold in this world. We will never have to hang our heads in shame because we’ve been proven wrong for trusting in Christ. Even if we suffer and die because of our faith, that will not cause us to be confounded. We know that our Savior went to the cross, and He has said that all who follow Him must take up their cross daily. He has forewarned us of the cost. He never said that He would rid the world of war. He said just the opposite. He has told us that following Him in this world leads to hatred and hostility from the world. So, we will not be confounded. We can watch the news and watch our nation crumble because we’ve forgotten our foundation, and we are not surprised. It does not cause us to stumble. It makes sense in light of the gospel. It makes sense in light of our Savior’s teaching. We are prepared to lean upon the cornerstone even if we will be put to death for doing so. We will not be confounded.

Those are the positive effects of believing on Christ. Why do we have such peace and confidence in light of our faith in Christ? Peter has provided the answer in verse 5. Let’s look back to the conclusions he drew about us.

**<sup>5</sup> you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:5)**

First, we are being built up as a spiritual house. That is a description of the church. The church is being built. Who is the one doing the building. It’s implied in the text. God is obviously the



builder. We are not builders, rather we are being built. You see the contrast. It is the contrast between humility and pride. We put ourselves into the hands of God to let Him be the one who uses us as He pleases. As we do so, He places us exactly where He wants us in His house, and every individual stone fits perfectly into the structure leaning upon the cornerstone. Praise God, we are being built! Here's how Paul put this in Ephesians 2,

**<sup>19</sup>So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup>built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup>in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup>In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)**

There is the same truth. Jews and Gentiles alike, Paul says, are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. That is the spiritual house that God is building. What are the stones? We are. Flesh and blood, human beings made in the image of God, whose faith and trust are in God through Jesus Christ. We are the living stones of this spiritual house.

Don't misinterpret the word spiritual to mean vague or nebulous. Peter in no way means to indicate that this house is not real, or is intangible. He says it is spiritual because it produced by the sole power of God Himself without natural instrumentality. It is spiritual in contrast to being carnal, or the work of man's hands, as was the temple in Jerusalem. Being spiritual, it will endure forever, in contrast with the Temple in Jerusalem, which would be destroyed in a matter of years. This spiritual house is as real as this building in which we are sitting. It is invisible because it is spiritual, but it is real. It is the real creation of God, the house He is building for Himself in this world. Whereas this building will crumble and fall, the spiritual house will endure forever, even through the judgment.

So, we are the true temple. But that is not all. We are also a holy priesthood. This is astounding. It was such a revolutionary truth that it changed the world. There is no caste system in the church. Until Christ came, the priesthood was limited to the tribe of Levi. They were the only one's able to offer sacrifices and minister on behalf of the people in the presence of God. But now that Christ has come, the old priesthood has been replaced by a new one. Our High Priest anoints us all as priests. His blood cleanses us to be His ministers in this world. All believers are priests of God Most High. As priests, we are called to bring people to God. The role of a priest was to act as a representative of the people before God. He was to offer sacrifices on behalf of those who wanted to come to God. That is now the role of every Christian. We should be striving to help people come to God through Jesus, in the way that God has prescribed.

Jesus is the way. His body was the sacrifice. His blood was the offering. Forgiveness is available through Him. Now, the only sacrifices and offerings that remain are our bodies and lives. We act as priests as we offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. We share in Christ's sufferings as His priests, and we count it a privilege and a joy. We rejoice in our sufferings because it is a priestly service. There is no stronger evangelistic appeal than the joyful sufferings of the saints. Our sufferings will not put us to shame, they will not confound us, they

will not cause us to make haste. They will cause us to rejoice that we have been counted worthy to suffer for the sake of Christ the Cornerstone.